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ABSTRACT

Composition pedagogy that challenges students to reflect on their participation in discourse communities reveals an attempt by teachers to balance disciplinary concerns with the realities of students' worlds. Such a pedagogy consists of students repositioning themselves in relation to the various discourses which comprise their own ways of speaking. The third and newest edition of the textbook by Sommers and McQuade, "Student Writers at Work and in the Company of Other Writers," reflects a concerted effort to define the academic discourse community as including student writers. The book presents the work of both student and professional writers as collaborative. Although less so than in prior editions, the textbook does tend to emphasize effective writing technique over promoting the development of students' own voices as writers. There is a disjuncture in the textbook's use of questions that highlight technique and discussions of what is valuable in professional writers' work. To its credit, the third edition of "Student Writers" seeks to balance student voices with professionals by pairing essays by students and professionals in order to address a particular literary technique. The book repositions student voices, foregrounding student writers as experts who have something valuable to offer the discourse community. (SG)

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Interrogating the Value of Student Voices

Composition pedagogy that challenges students to reflect on their participation in various discourse communities reveals an attempt by contemporary teachers to balance disciplinary concerns with realities of students' worlds. By inviting student writers to develop an awareness of the discourses of school and the discourses of their lives outside of school, students learn to consider the possibilities of language and to see themselves as authorities of language and not just students or imitators of it. As a teacher I am interested in teaching composition in a way that invites discussion of language as dynamic and changing instead of in terms which tend to focus on its boundaries. The discussion of discourse community theory within the field of composition suggests to me ways of imagining language as dynamic at the same time that it reflects those dynamics through the discursive connections and tensions evident in its diversity of perspectives. A bried sampling of this diversity might look someting like this. David Bartholomae describes this pedagogy in terms of students' growing "awareness that understanding is mediated" (78) not learned; Patricia Bizzell discusses it as a way in which the scope of academic discourse is expanded (52); for Judith Goleman it's an on-going dialogue with one's own critical knowledge (55); to Min-zhan Lu it means negotiating through conflicting voices (447); and Joseph Harris imagines it as students

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repositioning themselves in relation to the various discourses which comprise their own ways of speaking (19).

There is, however, a marked contrast between the conversation in professional journals regarding discourse community pedagogy, and the manner in which composition textbooks participate in this conversation. While textbook writers reveal a desire to acknowledge and include student discourses along side of academic discourse, the tension between them is apparent in the ways student writing and voices are presented in textbooks.

As a way of investigating this concern, I have been examining textbooks that can be read as enactments of discourse community theory; that is, books which make an effort to re-imagine the discipline of composition by repositioning student work in relation to "credentialed" participants in the field. What has intrigued me most is how the textbook language of explanations, questions, and assignments create a discourse which frames the student writing that is included in them. The two key questions I have kept in mind while working with these materials have been the following: (1) How does the use and discussion of student writing represent the idea of a discourse community?; and (2) Does the included student writing represent the work of "good" students who imitate models and follow guidelines, or the work of students who attempt to push at the boundaries of assigned frames through the use of their own discursive knowledge? In short, how are students participating in the discourse community? In the interest of keeping to my allotted time, the book I will focus on in this talk is Sommers and McQuade's third edition of Student Writers at Work. What I want to do here is provide you with an understanding of how I'm reading these textbooks.

I decided to talk about the third edition of Student Writers at Work because it explicitly aims to represent a "community of writers" by bringing together the work of student and professional writers and focusing on their shared experience. Its revised title--Student Writers at Work and in the Company of Other Writers--reflects a concerted effort to define the academic discourse community as a place where students have something valuable to offer--as a place where the work of student writers is acknowledged as comparable to that of professional writers. The work of both student and professional writers is represented as more collaborative in that, like the textbook writers themselves, students contribute significantly to a discussion on the work of composing. This is the claim the book's editors make in their preface: "Reading what other students have to say about writing should assure [students] that all writers . . . grapple with many of the same problems." Beyond this shared experience, however, the student essays selected for the book were chosen on the basis of the students' ability to skillfully employ literary elements that are also evident in work by professional writers. By demonstrating that students can participate within the academic discourse community as equals through skillful use of literary elements, this textbook offers a different representation of discourse community theory than what one reads of in journals. Instead of moving toward an acknowledgement or exploration of the variety discourses students participate in, what students are asked to do in Student Writers at Work is to adopt the discourse of the academic community which values a writer's ability to use metaphor, transitions, parallel structure, sensory words, irony, point-of-view, arrangement, contrast. The list goes on. So as discussion of discourse focuses on these types of qualities and techniques for successful writing, student work shifts accordingly. As students attempt to

incorporate and shape their writing through literary techniques, the distinctive sounds of the discourses they might bring to writing are muffled and, eventually, erased by disciplinary values.

When I began working with this book a year ago, my initial response to it was not particularly generous or positive. For although its inclusion of student work was admirable, it seemed to me to slip into traditional ways of knowing and talking about writing rather than permitting student voices to enter into the conversation with ways of speaking that would truly open the discourse community of composition. This emphasis on employing literary elements in student writing circumvents the opportunity for students to investigate language in a way that leads to what Harris describes as "an awareness of and pleasure in the various competing discourses that make up their own" (17). And while the editors state that students will have the opportunity to distinguish their own voices from those in the book, I could only imagine comparisons of quality since this discourse community is defined in terms of writers who successfully use literary techniques. What I hadn't considered at the time and which has since been especially helpful in moving me toward more generous readings of textbooks like Student Writers at Work is the concept of repositioning that Harris proposes in his essay "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing." If I ask myself : "How are the editors of this textbook ***repositioning themselves*** in relation to the "continuous and conflicting" discourses within the field of composition by ***repositioning student work*** ?", I have a way to begin reading the value of student voices and writing within an editors' project.

I want to turn, now, to a particular assignment from Student Writers at Work in order to discuss the difficulty of negotiating the terms of academic discourse while attempting to acknowledge the value of student

voices. In a discussion about purpose in writing early on in the book, the editors point to an essay entitled "Streets of Gold: The Myth of the Model Minority" as an example of writing shaped not only by the concerns of the writer as an individual but by the writer's concerns as a member of a specific ethnic group. The student (Curtis Chang) is quoted as claiming: "I wished to explain to everyone the true socioeconomic conditions of Asian-Americans and expose how we are being used for ideological reasons. I also hoped to stimulate further thought on Asian-American issues, to interest others in subjecting our situation to intellectual scrutiny" (13). Chang's membership in his particular ethnic community appears to be a motivating factor in his choice of projects. The difference between his project, however, and another student's is not described by the editors as a difference in discourse (his use of language) but as a difference in audience. Chang's "distinctive" Asian-American voice is discussed in terms of influencing where he might choose to speak, not how or why he might choose to speak a particular way. The editors point out that Chang has chosen to address a community of readers outside of his ethnic community while

> Other writers seem intent on positing their distinctive voices in the communities in which they participate, whether those communities are the political, social, economic, racial, or ethnic intersections of a neighborhood or the intellectual expanses of a college or university. (13)

Furthermore, students using the textbook are asked in two of the seven technique and revision questions following his essay to consider his choice of audience in terms of an ***effective technique***. No where are they asked to reflect on how his "distinctive voice" shapes his project or how they might respond as an audience themselves.

While the textbook questions and assignments surrounding Chang's essay don't invite students to question or explore how his project or the discourse of a specific community might contribute to or re-shape the academic context for which it is produced, it is the way in which Chang integrates his experience and "passion" with academic discourse that the editors name as a source of the essay's success. This is what they say in their commentary following his essay:

> It takes confidence to allow yourself to put your own images in the midst of detailed statistics and subtle analyses of public issues and especially to claim that your images reveal the truth behind the complex words used by others. You have to believe that your own way of understanding issues is as important as the words of authorities you quote. (102)

This claim, as well as others on the same page, emphasize the value of acknowledging authority that grows out of experience. One way that Chang's experience as an Asian-American and authority as a writer is immediately evident is through his use of personal pronouns. For example, he opens his essay by talking about ***his*** ancestors and includes himself throughout the essay by using the collective pronouns we, us, and our.

Inserting oneself in this manner throughout a piece of expository writing requires taking a risk; students are taught to keep personal pronouns out of this type of writing in order to present research material objectively. But for Chang his inclusion of self works well because it is so deftly woven together with his research materials and supports his claim. In a similar manner, he also weaves his own images of racism against Asian-Americans throughout his research as he describes, for example, how society sees Asian-Americans as "apple polishing, 'well-behaved' teacher's pets," or

"'white-washed' Asians," or "techno-coolies." The success of Chang's essay, then, comes not only from his ability to employ literary techniques--that is, to research the best sources, present a body of facts, or approach his audience adeptly--but from his ability to assert a truth about racism which his experience in a particular community has taught him and which challenges "a formidable list of major news publications that stand opposed to what he is going to prove" (101).

The textbook editors' commentary reveals an attempt to talk about student writing beyond disciplinary techniques by applauding the writer's decision to turn to himself as an authority. At the same time, however, they continue to represent the discipline by acknowledging his skillful use of literary techniques. The negotiation between academic and student discourse represented in the questions, commentary, and writing assignments that surround this essay about Asian-Americans is not seamless. There is a disjuncture between how the technique and revision questions ask students to analyze Chang's work and how the textbook editors describe, in their commentary, what is valuable about his work. The former (the questions) encourages an analytical dissection of the essay for its technical merit; the latter (the editors' discussion) suggests that the use of literary techniques is best guided by the authority each student brings to the project she proposes. This combination of technique and authority seems to me to be a constructive tension that might lead to assignments that would invite students to attempt similar projects of negotiation. However, this does not occur in either the "Suggestions for Writing" or "Working With the Technique in Your Writing." In two of the three "Suggestions for Writing" assignments, students are appointed the task of researching myths about Asian-Americans. If students' own experiences, however, are African-American or

recently immigrated from Eastern Europe or middle-class white American, then these assignments disconnect them from their experiences, interests, passions, and discourses and promote a type of report writing that doesn't engage them as individuals or authorities. Although student choice is frequently limited by assigned topics, inviting students to define their own focus allows them to draw on their own authority and experience. This type of self-focusing is better illustrated in the two assignments under "Working With the Technique in Your Writing" where students choose the myth or phrase they will write about. What strikes me about all five of the writing assignments related to this essay, though, is that no where in any of them do the textbook editors instruct students to consider how they might use ***their*** authority and experience as they work with these topics. After all, it is Curtis Chang's authority and experience as an Asian-American ***combined*** with his ability to build an effective argument that they describe as the source of his essay's success.

Despite the difficulties of negotiating between academic and student discourse, Student Writers at Work represents a textbook in which the editors have struggled for three editions, now, to bring student voices into the conversation about writing. The difficulty of repositioning student voices in relation to the discipline is evident in the variety of negotiations represented in each of the book's editions. In the first edition the primary voices outside of the preface are those of students talking about what it means to write and relating their stories and ideas in their essays. The second edition reflects the influences of disciplinary pressures and traditions as the book expanded to include pieces written by professional writers, a section on moving from personal topics to expository and argumentative topics, and a glossary. While the third edition is as large as the second, it

reveals a concerted effort to balance student voices with professionals by ***pairing*** each student essay with a professional essay in order to address a particular literary technique. The work that all three editions of Student Writers at Work represents is an attempt by its editors to create a textbook that repositions ***itself*** in relation to the tradition of honoring only professional "literary" writing as worthy of "serious" consideration (SWW vi). It works to accomplish this by ***repositioning*** student voices -- foregrounding them as experts who have something valuable to offer the discourse community of composition and imagining them as capable of producing writing that can be said to possess the literary qualities of professional writers.

This concept of repositioning is what allows me to be generous and open-minded as I move between conversations about discourse community pedagogy in professional journals and the ways in which composition textbooks participate in that conversation. For as Harris points out in his essay: one does not need "like-minedness" or "consensus" to have a community. What is significant is the attempt to continue negotiating the terms of the community--both with each other as professionals and with our students.